

Oyster Focus Groups

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Executive Summary

On May 4, 2001 GroupSense Research conducted two focus group discussions in Novato, California for Food Marketing & Economics Group and the Pacific Coast Shellfish Growers Association. There were 10 consumers in the focus group of oyster users and 10 consumers in the non-user focus group. Focus groups are a qualitative method used to obtain in-depth information on a specific topic through a discussion group atmosphere. The overall objective of the research was to further understand potential oyster consumers and the factors that are considered in their purchase decision. The key findings and conclusions based on the research are highlighted below.

Perceptions about Oysters

- Users tend to like oysters because of their distinctive flavor and the social aspect of eating oysters. Some of their dislikes are regarding their slimy and chewy texture, difficulty to prepare and health concerns such as food allergies or contamination.
- Non-users dislike their salty and fishy flavor and slimy, chewy and gritty texture. They are also concerned about safety issues such as perishability and possible contamination. They do recognize the fun and social aspects of eating oysters.
- Negative experiences with oysters often appear to be associated with unknowingly ordering and consuming raw oysters. These negative incidents can establish a strong reluctance or food aversion against oysters.
- The texture and consistency of the raw oysters seem to be the most difficult barriers for potential consumers to overcome.
- Other barriers to consuming oysters include their fishy and briny flavor, freshness, health concerns, cleaning and preparation, and expense.

- Most users and non-users are aware of the supposed aphrodisiacal properties of oysters. They didn't know if it is actually true, but find it to be an interesting and fun legend.

Nutritional Benefits

- ◆ The nutritional content of oysters is not well known among users and non-users. Further education regarding their nutrition benefits should be considered for potential consumers.

Aquaculture

- ◆ Knowledge of how oysters are grown and harvested is also fairly limited. Some of the consumers who are aware, received their information from “educational” television programs such as Martha Stewart Living.

Food Safety

- ◆ Some consumers are aware of the sayings regarding not consuming oysters in warmer weather months. They claim to accept its validity; however, they don't seem to restrict their consumption because of it.
- ◆ Potential consumers are slightly concerned about possible contamination and are aware of the potentially serious health effects.

Restaurant Consumption

- ◆ Consumers are more likely to purchase oysters at restaurants than prepare them at home. Some of their reasons include not having to clean or prepare the oysters, but being able “to just enjoy them”.
- ◆ Consumers tend to order oysters at a restaurant for a treat or a special occasion. They enjoy eating oysters with a group of friends.
- ◆ Some of the main factors potential consumers consider when deciding whether to order oysters are freshness, price, and how they are prepared – especially the types of sauces used.

- ◆ Some of the most appealing oyster preparation methods are barbecued, grilled, baked and oyster shots. The addition of sauce or other seasonings increases the appeal of oysters for most consumers.
- ◆ Non-users appear to be more likely to try cooked oysters, especially barbecued, than raw oysters.
- ◆ The visual presentation of oyster dishes is very important to non-users in their consideration of oysters. They like the presentation in the shell as long as the oyster is cooked.

Home Consumption

- ◆ Some of the factors consumers consider when purchasing raw oysters are freshness, quality, cost, size, how to prepare them, and what they should serve with them.
- ◆ Most consumers believe the cost of oysters in a grocery store or fish market is reasonable, especially compared to purchasing them at a restaurant. They think the pricing is comparable to other types of seafood.

Organic / Eco-labeling

- ◆ Most consumers are not interested in organic oysters and do not see the need for or benefit of organic oysters.
- ◆ Most think that organic oysters would cost more than regular oysters and they are not willing to pay extra for them.
- ◆ Similarly, they are not interested in or concerned about certification of oysters grown in a sustainable manner.

Recommendations for Increasing Consumption

In order to increase the consumption of oysters, the following recommendations should be considered based on the feedback from the focus groups:

- ⇒ Promote the nutritional benefits of fresh oysters by further educating consumers through advertising and promotional material.
- ⇒ Develop educational material to inform consumers about the growth and harvest of Pacific Oysters and minimize concerns regarding contamination.
- ⇒ Provide informational pamphlets for distribution at grocery stores to help inform consumers how to clean and prepare oysters. Create recipe cards with several barbecue preparation methods or a recipe for a “Barbecued Oysters Party”.
- ⇒ Develop promotional materials for restaurants with attractive photographs of barbecued/grilled oysters to inform and encourage non-users’ trial.
- ⇒ Develop appealing menu suggestions for restaurants including combination platters, “Oyster of the Day”, “First Timer” and “Group” specials. Encourage the use of sauces and garlic, as well as grilling or barbecuing oysters (possibly outdoors) to promote sales.
- ⇒ Provide free samples to people who have never tried oysters.
- ⇒ Serve oysters at Happy Hour or have specials with certain drink orders.
- ⇒ Suggest that restaurants advise consumers that oysters on the half shell are raw, so their patrons avoid unpleasant surprises and possible food aversion.
- ⇒ Encourage the development of a fun and unique atmosphere (like oyster bars or sushi bars) in restaurants to foster the social aspects of eating oysters.
- ⇒ Promote the belief that oysters have aphrodisiacal properties. Determine if there is any research to support these claims or possibly fund/sponsor a real or promotional study. Possibly develop an advertising campaign comparing its benefits over Viagra or other such medications.

Projectability of Findings

Qualitative research is exploratory in nature and provides a rich source of information in clarifying existing theories, creating hypothesis, and giving direction to future research. Although the respondents were drawn from the group in the population from whom we seek answers, they were not chosen on any statistical basis. Therefore, the results of qualitative research are not meant to be quantified, nor are they meant to take the place of a quantitative study.

Introduction

On May 4, 2001 GroupSense Research conducted two focus group discussions for Food Marketing & Economics Group and the Pacific Coast Shellfish Growers. The Pacific Coast Shellfish Growers are seeking to expand the market for fresh oysters in the United States. In order to attempt to increase consumption of oysters, they are commissioning qualitative research to further understand potential oyster consumers and the factors that are considered in their purchase decision, in both food service and retail settings.

Objectives

- ◆ To gain understanding of typical oyster consumers and their perceptions about oysters.
- ◆ To explore and understand non-users' past experiences consuming oysters and to identify barriers to their consumption of oysters.
- ◆ To determine and explore what issues potential consumers consider in deciding whether to purchase oysters at a grocery store or restaurant.
- ◆ To determine potential consumers' interest in organic oysters.

Methodology

This study was executed by conducting focus groups. Focus groups are a qualitative method, which offer a means of obtaining in-depth information about a specific topic through an interactive discussion group atmosphere. Focus groups primarily utilize open-ended questions to gain insight into the participants' experiences and opinions. The discussion setting also allows the moderator to probe for details and motivation.

Two group discussions were conducted with potential consumers – one with current users and one with non-users. The groups were conducted in Novato at Q & A Research. They

were moderated by Susan Corbelli of GroupSense Research. Copies of the discussion guide and screener are included in the Appendix.

Respondent specifications included:

- 10 participants per group
- One group of users, one group of non-users
- Users: Purchased or ordered oysters 2 times or more in 12 months
- Non-users: Purchased or ordered oysters 0 – 1 times in last 12 months
- Age 25 - 54 years
- Mixed Groups (60:40 female to male)
- Equal spread for household income (over \$50,000), marital status, education
- Mix for ethnicity (20% Hispanic, 20% Asian*, 60% Caucasian)
- *Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, Filipino, Hmong, Korean--not Chinese
- No food allergies (specifically seafood)
- No market research participation in last 12 months, none ever in shellfish
- Not employed in shellfish industry or food service industry, or market research industry

Note: Gender, race, and user or non-user classification are indicated in parenthesis after verbatims. Unless indicated otherwise, the individual was Caucasian.

Projectability of Findings

Qualitative research is exploratory in nature and provides a rich source of information in clarifying existing theories, creating hypothesis, and giving direction to future research. Although the respondents were drawn from the group in the population from whom we seek answers, they were not chosen on any statistical basis. Therefore, the results of qualitative research are not meant to be quantified, nor are they meant to take the place of a quantitative study.

Detailed Findings

Perceptions about Oysters

The users and non-users were asked to record all their likes/dislikes, impressions, associations, assumptions and feelings about oysters using a technique called mind mapping. Please see the Appendix for a sample of selected mind maps.

User Likes and Dislikes

Users tended to like oysters because of their distinctive flavor and the social aspect of eating oysters. Some of their dislikes were regarding their slimy and chewy texture, difficulty in preparation and health concerns such as food allergies or contamination. It is interesting to note that the social aspect of eating oysters was cited by non-users as well as users.

User Likes and Dislikes

Likes	Dislikes
Source of iron	Slimy, mucousy
Tasty, Delicious	Chewy
Taste like the sea – salty, briny, seaweed-like	Fishy
Distinctive taste	Bland
Fun to eat - opening	Time-consuming to prepare
Party food	Hard to open
Fancy	Expensive at restaurants
Hors d'oeuvre or meal	Allergic to shellfish
Erotic	Possible contamination
Rich in flavor	Slippery
Pearls	People have strong feelings – either love or hate them
Remind of beer	Not micro-waveable
Help you recover from a hangover	

Non-Users Likes and Dislikes

The main negative comments from the non-users were regarding their salty and fishy flavor and slimy, chewy and gritty texture. Some comments also focused on safety issues such as perishability and possible contamination. However, there were several positive comments that emphasized the fun and social aspects of eating oysters, as well as the ease of preparation.

Non-User Likes and Dislikes

Likes	Dislikes
Yummy	Red tide
Healthy - omega fatty acids good for hair and skin	Know your months- months w/ Y's
Sexy - aphrodisiac	Months with Y , pass by
BBQ	Too fishy/salty/hard to chew
Shots	Slimy/snotty
Stuffed	Shell is nasty
Easy to cook they tell you when they are done	Ugly
Fun to eat with people	Remind of cooked mushrooms
Social	Sandy/gritty
Finger food	No taste
Can tell when they are ready to eat because they pop open	They act as a filter for toxins so they can be contaminated
Fast to cook	Contaminated
Good in soup	Don't keep long

Perceived Consumer Image

In order to get an indication of the image associated with oyster consumers, the respondents were asked to draw a picture of a typical consumer. This exercise is a projective technique, which aims to draw out richer insights in the perceptions of consumers regarding product images. Please see Appendix for a selection of the drawings.

The respondents perceived two different types of typical oyster consumers. The “yuppie” oyster consumer tended to be a male or female professional in their late 20’s to 40’s earning \$50,000 to \$100,000 wearing business attire or trendy casual clothes and driving a sports car. This individual tended to be hard working, assertive, social, perhaps somewhat pretentious, open-minded, young spirited and “ready for the weekend” or to party. In contrast, the “blue collar worker” oyster consumer tended to be a single, male tradesman earning \$20,000 to \$50,000 and driving a van or a truck. Some of the key personality characteristics of this consumer were that he was casual, hard working, outgoing, happy-go-lucky and friendly. Both consumers were perceived to value good food, socializing, relaxing and enjoying their leisure time. Some of the respondents said they could identify with the “yuppie” consumer, while others felt they were much more casual and less pretentious than the “yuppie” user.

Aphrodisiac

One of the positive perceptions about oysters mentioned in both groups was regarding them being an aphrodisiac. Most respondents in the user and non-user groups seemed to be aware of the idea that oysters may have some aphrodisiacal properties. Most didn’t know if it was actually true, yet thought it was an interesting and fun legend. Several noted that its effects were probably psychological because it gets people thinking and talking about sex.

“It stimulates the erotic part” (Hispanic male user)

“They’re sexy because they are an aphrodisiac.” (female non-user)

“It’s a myth.” (male non-user)

“The myth sounds good.” (male user)

“Even the myth gets things going, from what I hear” (female user)

“It’s more of a state of mind.” (male non-user)

“It’s what you want it to be.” (male non-user)

“It’s possible, I guess.” (male non-user)

“It puts the idea into your head.” (female non-user)

“It works as an aphrodisiac because it gets you talking about it .” (male non-user)

Past Experiences

In order to further understand non-users, their experiences trying oysters and their reluctance to eat oysters, they were asked to describe their first or most recent experience consuming oysters. They were asked to note when, where, and how they tried oysters. Most of the negative experiences seem to be associated with (sometimes unknowingly) ordering and consuming raw oysters. Many experienced gag reflexes or the inability to actually consume the oysters. This often led to a reluctance to try oysters again or even a food aversion. The other negative experiences often were associated with the texture of the oysters – which they often described as either slimy or chewy depending on how it was prepared.

“It wasn’t pleasant. I practically gagged. It was fishy, kind of gushy. The barbecuing kind of gets rid of the smell. The texture is worse than liver. It is very hard to chew.” (male non-user)

“The first time I had them, they were overcooked. They were like rubber. I was at a party at someone’s house in the 70s. They were a cocktail thing. After chewing it for a few bites, I found a convenient way to get rid of it. It was like a tennis ball.” (male non-user)

“The last time I was barbecuing them at a friend’s house. They had a lot of sauce on them and they weren’t overcooked. They were cooked that day. They weren’t too bad that way. They were tolerable. They had more flavors on them.” (male non-user)

“Growing up we had a lot of oysters. My mom usually fixed them in a soup with a lot of vegetables and a lot of ginger, which makes it spicy. It’s good. The consistency was rubbery but I didn’t mind it. The other way I’ve had them is grilled with garlic and butter. It’s pretty good.” (Asian female non-user)

“The first time I tried them I was in my teens and a bunch of us went out to a real nice restaurant in the city. I ordered Oysters on a half shell. Did I know that they were going to bring me a plate of raw oysters? I just about died. I sent them back and got Oysters Rockefeller and they were really good. I think that barbecued, they’re the best – if you have somebody that knows how to cook them.” (female non-user)

“I’ve had them twice. Both times they were on the half shell and I didn’t know what that meant. I was at this really posh party and it had incredible wine. I thought they were really horrible. Later I found out that you are supposed to have them with something like vinegar on them. The second time I had them with champagne. I don’t know if it was because of the champagne. I just found them a lot more tolerable and a lot more fun. As far as taste, I would never have them alone. They had a little lemon on them. You just swallow it down really quick.” (female non-user)

“I was at a birthday party with a bunch of Filipinos. We always had oysters at birthday parties. I had never had one. They asked me if I wanted to try one. I thought that they were cooked. When I put it in my mouth, it came back up. Never again. Never again. It was gross! Lck! Slimy! I didn’t even taste it.” (Filipino female non-users)

“I’ve tried them one time. Probably the last time! Maybe I’ll try them barbecued sometime. They were steamed. I was at a friend’s house and they were an appetizer. There was butter to dip them in. It was rubbery and slimy. I got it down. Just one of them.” (male user)

"I'll try anything twice. In the case of oysters, I think I've tried them three times. The first time was Oysters Rockefeller at a casino in Las Vegas and that was in the midst of a night of being in Las Vegas and I really don't remember anything. The second time was at a Cajun restaurant in Louisiana and they were fried and I didn't really care for that. And the last time, I was at a restaurant on Irving Street in Sunset called PJ's Oysters Bed . I was there for my girlfriend's birthday and she likes oysters. We had lots of different kinds of oysters. We had Oysters Rockefeller and that was pretty good. We had Vodka Oyster shooters with ½ a shot of vodka and ½ a shot of Tabasco and an oyster floating in the middle. It was actually ok. You just tossed the thing back. I think they used a good hot sauce and that probably makes all the difference in the world." (male non-user)

Nutritional Benefits

Most of the respondents, in both the user and non-user groups, were not very knowledgeable regarding the nutritional benefits of oysters. A few thought they might be a good source of iron and omega fatty acids. Some of the non-users thought they were high in fat, while others thought it was the sauces and cheese that made them high fat. A few wondered about their cholesterol content. One individual commented that he was surprised about how little they (self included) knew about the nutrition of oysters compared to what they knew about chicken, beef and fish.

"Probably lowfat by themselves and high fat when you add all the other stuff to them." (female user)

"I don't know if they have a lot of cholesterol or not. I should probably find out." (male user)

"I would think that they are healthy for you" (female user)

"Any shellfish is high fat" (male non-user)

Aquaculture

Awareness of How and Where Grown

Although many of the users and non-users had little knowledge of how and where oysters were grown and harvested, some had a fairly good understanding of the process. Several cited watching television programming regarding oyster production on the Learning Channel or Discovery Channel and an episode of Martha Stewart Living.

“They come in from Washington State in little shells. They are grown in Tomales Bay...” (Hispanic male user)

“I think there is a farm near Stinson Beach. I think it’s a cold water type thing. I saw this thing on Martha Stewart where they showed the farms. Basically they put them out on nets until they grow and then they harvest them. But they do have farms.” (female user)

“They are grown on large racks out on the bay. They sink these racks. They have these racks they grow on. They harvest them every so often when they are healthy. My wife loves them and that’s the only place she will buy them.” (male user)

“They harvest them in the East Coast by scooping them off the bottom of the bay.” (male user)

Awareness of Varieties

Many of the respondents were not aware of the different varieties of oysters. A few of the users were aware of different varieties and were able to recall Blue Point and Hog Island varieties. There were mixed opinions about the flavors and textures of the various varieties.

“The tastes are similar.” (female user)

“They all taste like oysters, but they’re all different.” (male user)

“Hog Island are nice which you can get and I think they come from Washington.” (male user)

“Blue Points are always nice, but they are hard to get in California.” (male user)

“The oysters on the East Coast seem to be more crisp. The flesh is a little firmer. “ (male user)

“As I moved further west, they got slimier in consistency. The Atlantic are chewier.” (Asian female user)

Food Safety

A few of the respondents in both the user and non-user groups were familiar with the belief that oysters shouldn't be consumed in certain months, particularly the warmer weather months. In the non-user group, they cited the saying “In months with Y, pass by”. In the user group, some of the respondents noted the “Don't eat oysters in months without an R” saying.

“Know your months.” (male non-user)

“Months with Y, pass by.” (male non-user)

“Is it months with Y? Red tide is more predominant in months with y – like January, February and July. The red tide is more predominant in those months historically. It may creep into other periods too. It's kind of an old sea thing they talk about. People go out and get their oysters and clams in those months and probably shouldn't do that.” (male non-user)

“Warmer weather months don't have R's and you should only eat oysters when they come out of the ocean during the time of the year when it is cold. So you don't have them in May, June, July, August and until September. From September until April.” (male user)

“I think that it's really about the bacteria that's in the water, like if there is Red Tide or whatever. It coincides with the R thing.” (female user)

Most of those who knew the statement seemed to accept its validity; however when questioned, it didn't sound like they actually considered it when purchasing or ordering oysters. One individual thought it was specific to oysters from the East Coast.

The respondents were also aware that the effects of the contamination were quite serious and possibly fatal.

"I think it's what I heard on the East Coast and I didn't think they harvested them then. But on the West Coast they seem to be available all the time." (male user)

"People die from it. They get this nerve virus." (male non-user)

"If you eat a bad oyster you can die or be in the hospital for a few days. " (Hispanic male user)

Some respondents stated that they took some precautions when buying and ordering oysters. They emphasized that oysters must be tightly sealed when purchased and that if they don't open up after cooking, they should be discarded. One individual also reported that oysters are often tested before they are sold to the consumer. Another individual mentioned that he had heard of a new process to pasteurize oysters.

"The way they test in Tomales Bay right now is they hit two oysters together. If they hear a wet or empty (hollow) noise, they throw it away. I know people who ate oysters and got a bad reaction and had to go to the hospital." (Hispanic male user)

"They should be tightly closed. Any oyster that not tightly closed has gone bad. (male user)

"For myself, I always look to see if it's a popular dish and lots of people have ordered it, especially if they are raw. Just because if you are not sure of the quality then I look to see how many people are ordering it." (Asian female user)

“They have this pasteurized oyster now that they make in New Orleans. I haven’t tried it, but I’ve heard about it. Supposedly they are safe to eat. They still have all the taste and texture of raw ones. There is a special process and it took them a long time to develop it. It doesn’t actually cook the oyster but takes out all the germs.” (male non-user)

Restaurant Consumption

Most of the non-users stated that they would be more likely to order oysters at a restaurant than to prepare them at home. Some of their reasons included not having to clean or prepare the oysters, but being able “to just enjoy them”. Most of the oyster users tended to be more likely to order them at a restaurant; however, a few of them did prepare oysters at home or even while camping. Their reasons for ordering oysters at a restaurant were that they considered them a treat or for a special occasion. Other reasons for having them at a restaurant rather than home included that their spouse or partner didn’t care for them and that they are difficult to shuck and prepare.

“At a restaurant, because my wife doesn’t like them. So it’s my chance to get them and enjoy them. It’s more of a special time because they are a little bit more spendy.” (male user)

“For me it’s a treat to go out and eat. I don’t cook a lot of seafood at home. So when I go to a restaurant, I especially like to get Oysters Rockefeller. I’ll get that as an appetizer. It’s a night out. They’re a little fancier. They’re rich. They make a great appetizer. (male user)

Favorite Oyster Restaurants

Some of the restaurants in the Bay Area at which the respondents had eaten oysters include:

Guittarez
Timber Cove Lodge
The Tides
Tamalpais Oysters
PJ's Oyster Bed
Scoma's

Also mentioned were small cafes and restaurants in the Bodega Bay area.

Purchase Considerations

Some of the main factors that potential consumers considered when deciding whether to order oysters were freshness, price, and how they were prepared. Barbecuing or grilling the oysters seemed to increase their appeal to users, as well as non-users. The addition of garlic and / or sauces with the oysters also increased their interest. The non-users also thought they would be more likely to order oysters if they "saw someone else's order that looked or smelled good". They would also be more likely to order if they were dining with someone who liked oysters and they could share the dish.

Additionally, both groups thought a special might increase their purchase likelihood.

"If people will share it with me. Because usually the people I go out with won't want them. If the size of the platter is too overwhelming, like if there are going to be 24 oysters, I just won't order them." (Asian female user)

"My favorite way that they come is a combination, where there is a variety of different fish and shellfish." (male user)

Restaurant Preparation Methods

Both groups were asked to record all the different ways oysters can be prepared and served at a restaurant. Both groups generated a large number of preparation methods; however, not surprisingly, the users were able to recall more methods than the non-users.

Different Preparation Methods at a Restaurant – Non-users

- BBQ
- Broiled
- Cioppino (aided recall)
- Fried oysters
- Grilled with garlic and butter
- Oyster sauce
- Oyster soup
- Oysters Rockefeller
- Po' Boys
- Raw/half shell
- Sautéed
- Shots

Different Preparation Methods at a Restaurant – Users

- Baked
- Barbecued
- Cioppino
- Florentine
- Fried
- Fried in rice flour
- Gumbo
- Hangtown omelet
- Lemon & garlic
- Oyster soup
- Oyster stew
- Oyster stuffing
- Oysters Al Jerez (garlic, white wine, cheese, and olive oil)
- Oysters Rockefeller
- Po' Boy sandwiches (only with aided recall)

Raw
Smoked oysters
Steamed

Most Appealing Preparation Methods

Among the non-users, there was a strong preference for cooked rather than raw oysters. A few of the users liked raw oysters, but most preferred cooked oysters. For the non-users, the most appealing oyster dishes were grilled oysters (with garlic and butter), barbecued oysters and oyster shots. For the users, the most popular preparation methods were barbecued, fried or baked. The users and non-users agreed about the importance of some type of sauce or seasoning on oysters.

“You don’t want to taste the oyster.” (male non-user)

Enough to cover it up.” (female nonuser)

“I like a variety of sauces, with a lot of flavor whether it’s garlic, red sauce, or barbecue sauce.” (male non-user)

Home Consumption

Several of the users reported that they had purchased oysters for home consumption. They either bought them at a fish market or a grocery store. Some of the grocery stores mentioned included Petaluma Market, Bodega Market and Molly Stone’s. Some users questioned the idea of buying them at a supermarket, as they were concerned about freshness.

“If I was going to buy them, I would go to a fish and poultry distributor. I wouldn’t even buy them in a supermarket.” (male user)

“Some place that tests each oyster that you buy.” (Hispanic male user)

Purchase Considerations

Some of the factors they considered when purchasing raw oysters were freshness, quality, cost, size, how to prepare them, and what they should serve with them. Regarding cost, most claimed that the price was reasonable, especially compared to purchasing

them at a restaurant. Some thought that the pricing was comparable to other types of seafood. Another minor factor was the disposal of the shells due to their malodor.

“I think it’s about right. It’s kind of in the same category as crab, lobster. I look at it in that same frame of expense.” (male user)

“The only problem is when you are done you have a few dozen oysters shells that smell terrible after a few days. So if they are not going to pick up the trash for a few days, they’re going to get pretty ripe.” (male user)

Home Preparation Methods

The respondents were asked how they prepared oysters at home. Some of their favorite ways to prepare oysters were barbecued, grilled with lemon and garlic and oven-roasted. To obtain more information about preparing oysters, they would reference a seafood cookbook or search the Internet for sites regarding cooking and seafood.

Awareness / Use of Shucked Oysters

Most consumers were aware of shucked oysters, but had not purchased them. A few respondents had purchased or tried fresh shucked oysters in a jar. They cited their ease of use as one of the key benefits. Some found their appearance unappealing.

“I just add those to seafood dishes, like a seafood stew. You just dump those in for a few minutes and they cook up and they’re nice. It’s simple.” (male user)

“I remember as a kid my parents would make soup. I don’t know if it came in a can or a jar. They would put them in with milk and they would make some kind of dumpling. It was really good.” (male user)

Organic / Eco-labeling

When questioned about organic food in general, most of the users were fairly indifferent. There were a few that were interested in organic produce, but did not normally purchase organic because of the price difference.

"I do (purchase it) sometimes, but if there's going to be an exorbitant price difference, I go with the conventional." (male user)

"I care a lot, but I usually can't afford it. I don't know about for seafood. For vegetables, I am concerned about pesticides. I would love to shop at Whole Foods all the time, but I can't. I would go the organic route as much as I could." (female user)

Interest in Organic Oysters

The respondents in the user group were asked what organic labeled oysters would mean to them. Most did not understand how an oyster could be considered organic or see the need or benefit of organic oysters.

"It would mean absolutely nothing." (male user)

"Not for oysters, it wouldn't make much sense." (male user)

"Even the ones that are cultivated off the shore, they are still natural. They are grown on a rope or net and then they harvest them. I consider that natural. It's not some chemically induced thing. I look at oysters as being natural." (male user)

"It's easy to see with vegetables, but I don't know how you could do that with oysters." (female user)

"What are they going to do, quarantine them?" (female user)

"I think there would have to be some education done as to what that means. Are you talking about putting chemicals in the water to make them grow faster or bigger or better tasting. I don't know exactly what that means." (male user)

“On Martha Stewart, they made every effort to put the oysters in the best location in a harbor with the ropes and net and huge wooden platforms. They were being fed naturally from the currents. Scientists have done a lot of work on this. To me that’s as organic and natural as you can get. Now I think most people are uneducated to the fact that they are even harvested that way. Most people think they are going out to the ocean and scooping them, so I think a lot of people don’t even know how large a business that is now and is growing. To me I think it is just as good as if you got them off the floor of the ocean.” (male user)

Cost of Organic Oysters

Most thought that organic oysters would cost more than regular oysters would and they were not willing to pay extra for organic oysters. They were also not really interested or concerned about growing oysters in a sustainable manner.

“It would just mean it would cost more, a lot more.” (female user)

“I would probably try it once just to see if there was a difference. Because I know that things that are organic tend to taste better in my opinion. So I would just be curious to see if they did tasted better. But if it didn’t make a difference to me, I wouldn’t purchase them again.” (Asian female user)

Increasing Oyster Consumption

Respondents were asked what they would do to increase oyster consumption if they were a chef or owner of a seafood restaurant. Both the users and non-users generated many interesting and creative ideas.

User Suggestions

- Let customers taste or sample - 1st time free
- I would boast about the source and their freshness
- Emphasize freshness like Catch of the Day
- I would have an Oyster of the Day – describe how prepared (female user)
- Offer lots of variety
- Have special oyster appetizers and main courses
- Buy 1, get one free
- Have Happy Hour oyster specials – a dozen ½ price
- Have a fun and clever atmosphere for eating, like a sushi bar
- Have a tropical environment with Latin music
- Have an oyster “Hooters”

Non-user Suggestions

- Advertise that you serve oysters
- Provide free samples
- Have specials (2 for 1)
- Offer a variety platter (different prep methods or sauces)
- Have a Happy Hour or cocktails with oysters
- Serve champagne with complimentary oysters
- Serve oysters with a special beverage
- Encourage couples to order oysters on dates
- Encourage the aphrodisiac myth
- Have an oyster bar
- Outdoor oyster barbecues
- Ensure the cleanliness of the restaurant

Some of the themes that surfaced in both groups were having oyster specials, serving oysters during Happy Hour, and offering a variety platter. Both groups also suggested providing samples to potential consumers to increase their interest.

“Offer a combination tray with 4 different varieties or ways they are prepared. That might increase sales because people would say I haven’t tried them 3 of the ways. That would be intriguing to me.”
(male user)

Both groups also seemed interested in an oyster bar or special setting for eating oysters that was fun and exciting.

“Come up with a clever way of making the atmosphere fun. Like ways of trying the different types. People love going to sushi because the atmosphere is different.” (female user)

“Like a Beni Hana oyster bar.” (female user)

“Even if you didn’t like them, you would go because you would find it would be interesting and fun. It would make you start liking them.” (female user)

While some of their ideas may be impractical and cost-prohibitive, several of the ideas have potential and could be developed further and implemented to increase oyster consumption in the food service and retail markets. For further discussion of these recommendations, please refer to the Executive Summary.